

The Modern-Day Daffodil Makers

January, 1999

Where do new daffodils come from? The common misconception is that they come from professional plant breeders in Holland. In actuality, most new daffodils come from hybridizers who began breeding their own daffodils to compete in shows. As they became successful, they began selling their surplus stocks, and so began hobby businesses. Some issue colorful catalogs; others simply have a short list.

The American Daffodil Society Data Bank, which lists some 14,548 registered daffodil names dating back to the 1800s, shows that 5,421 were bred in the British Isles; 3,267 in Australia; 2,033 in New Zealand; 1,905 in the United States; and 1,422 in Holland. The Dutch growers are very, very good at growing stocks on and making them available to the mass market. They buy the best from breeders around the world. That staple of Dutch catalogs, 'King Alfred', was bred in England and registered in 1899 by John Kendall. But it takes years to build up sufficient stocks, so to get really new daffodils, you should go directly to the breeder, if possible.

Interest in Britain was spurred by The Royal Horticultural Society which held a Daffodil Conference in 1884; this led to a series of shows each year during daffodil season. The Daffodil Society in Britain, which this year celebrated its centenary, also contributed to this interest

Currently, John Pearson and Clive Postles in England, and Brian Duncan in Northern Ireland are at the forefront of British raisers of daffodils. Retired from the British Army and now doing business as Hofflands Daffodils, Mr. Pearson's current specialty is in reverse bicolor daffodils—those with white or whitish cups and yellow petals. His large-cupped 'Altun Ha' is arguably the best of its type currently available.

Clive Postles regrettably no longer exports to the U.S. He purchased John Lea's business at Mr. Lea's death, and continues to offer those daffodils along with his own fine creations. 'Chelsea Girl' has a pink cup with lilac tones, and 'China Doll' has a pink rim on the white cup. 'Honeybourne', while coded as having a yellow cup, has a honey-buff, pale amber straight-sided cup.

Brian Duncan, retired from the dairy business, has a series of flowers with petals which are distinctly orange: 'Cosmic Dance', 'Dawn Run', 'Bandesara', 'Brodict', and 'Prairie Fire'. His colorful catalog also includes a number of very fine pink and white daffodils, both single and double.

Other current notable breeders in Britain are Kate Reade and Sir Frank Harrison in Northern Ireland, and John Blanchard in England.

Australians account for 3,267 of the listings in the ADS Data Bank. For three generations, the Jacksons and the Radcliffs in Tasmania have been breeding daffodils. David Jackson's current emphasis is on breeding daffodils with flat petals which require no grooming for shows. 'Impeccable' confirms he is meeting his goals. In Victoria, Rex and Kath Breen are continuing the Hancock family bulb business. Rod Barwick, at Glenbrook Bulb Farm, is relatively new to daffodil breeding, but he has raised many very fine miniatures which are making their way to the United States.

In New Zealand, Spud Brogden continues in his father's footsteps, as does Graham Phillips. Max Hamilton and Peter Ramsay are partners in Koanga Daffodils. Max specializes in double daffodils. John Hunter is another whose cultivars are being seen more and more frequently.

In Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, breeders have concentrated mainly on those daffodils in Divisions 1-4: trumpets, large cups, small cups, and doubles. American breeders have not neglected those divisions, but they have also made advances in the species hybrid divisions. Probably no one in America has done more to expand the range of daffodils than Grant Mitsch in Oregon. His hybrids cover the complete range of the classification. His 'Daydream' is the foundation upon which John Pearson has built his reverse bicolors. 'Quick Step' was the first of the fertile jonquil hybrids, followed later by 'Hillstar'. 'Catalyst' and 'Amadeus' are unrivalled for the depth of pink-red color in the cups. His daughter, Elise, and her husband, Richard Havens, are carrying on the Mitsch business. Elise's 'American Heritage' sets the standard for yellow-pink daffodils. The Mitsch family is one of the few who actually make their living from bulbs. Most of the others mentioned also have (or had) a "real job."

William Pannill, of Martinsville, Virginia, has raised a number of outstanding flowers. He doesn't have a sales list himself; Oregon Trail Daffodils, Cherry Creek Daffodils, and others list his bulbs. His 'Intrigue' was the Wister Award winner (outstanding garden flower) and 'Homestead' the Pannill Award winner (outstanding exhibition flower) for 1998.

The split corona daffodils had their beginnings in Holland. Jack Gerritsen was the first to concentrate on these daffodils which had their early detractors. Now they are finding favor in gardens worldwide.

The purpose of this rather long-winded dissertation is to point out that amateurs can be successful daffodil breeders. Even your scribe has one in commerce. Next month I'll tell you how to breed your own.